

Bodily Expression and the Worship of God

Bob Kauflin¹

Part 1

A while back I answered a letter from a young lady named Christy. She had questions about the varying degrees of expressiveness in the gathered worship of different churches. Recently, I've had a number of conversations about the same issue.

What should our worship of God look like? Are there clear biblical directives? Is it, as one church website says, a matter of "personal taste, personality, and habit?"

I want to make two points from the outset. First, determining how we should respond physically to God is a matter for God to decide, not us. God doesn't give us the option of determining how he should be worshiped. Second, in issues regarding our faith, bodily expression in corporate worship is an important but secondary issue. I should have no problem having fellowship or worshiping God with a church that may be more enthusiastic or reserved than I'm used to, as long as they are proclaiming the same gospel and glorying in the same Savior.

Having said that, bodily expressions are associated with worship throughout Scripture. Sometimes expressiveness is a spontaneous reaction to what God has revealed and done. Miriam grabbed her tambourine and danced exuberantly with other women on the other side of the Red Sea (Ex 15:20). The Israelites bowed their heads in worship when they heard how God was going to strike the firstborn sons of Egypt but spare their own children (Ex 12:27). Upon learning that the Lord promised to be with them in battle, the Levites "stood up to praise the Lord...with a very loud voice" (2Ch 20:19). Job's response to losing his family and possessions was to fall to the ground and worship (Job 1:20). In Acts 3:8, we read about the healed man who was walking and leaping and praising God. The apostle John fell on the ground like a dead man before the angel of the Lord (Rev 1:17).

All of these examples indicate an immediate and spontaneous reaction to events and circumstances. However, Scripture also commands us to proclaim God's greatness

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through our bodies. Here's a small sampling of ways God is pleased to receive our worship.

- Psalm 47:1 "Clap your hands, all peoples! Shout to God with loud songs of joy!"
- Psalm 95:6 "Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!"
- Psalm 149:3 "Let them praise his name with dancing, making melody to him with tambourine and lyre!"
- Psalm 22:23 "Stand in awe of [God]."
- 1 Timothy 2:8 "I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands."
- Revelation 4:10 "The twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever."

Clapping, shouting, kneeling, dancing, playing instruments, standing in awe, lifting hands, falling down. Given the variety of responses, it would be difficult to come up with a single form of expression that pleases God when we gather to honor him. Clearly all these actions are acceptable and appropriate in the worship of God, and this list is not meant to be exhaustive.

However, physical responses in themselves are no sign one way or the other that God is pleased with our worship. Next we'll look at examples of bodily expressions that didn't please God.

Part 2

We looked at a number of Scriptures that confirmed God is pleased with a variety of physical acts when we worship him. However, externals in themselves are no guarantee that our worship is acceptable to God. Now we'll take a look at physical actions that were condemned by God due to the sinful hearts of the worshipers.

The most common word for worship in the Old Testament is *hishtahvah*, which means to bow down in homage or reverent submission. While bowing down is an appropriate act whenever we gather to worship God, the same word and action is used to describe the worship of idols. For example, Isaiah 2:8 reads, "Their land is filled with idols; they bow down to the work of their hands, to what their own fingers have made."

Singing accompanied by instruments is another means God has given us to express passion and devotion to him. In our current culture, singing has almost become synonymous with worship. However, God finds no pleasure in singing that is not accompanied with righteous living.

Take away from me the noise of your songs;
to the melody of your harps I will not listen.
But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:23–24 ESV)

Lifting hands can signify a wide range of emotions and attitudes—dependence, gratefulness, expectation, reverence, or celebration. However, God condemned both the actions and motives of the Israelites through his prophet Isaiah. “When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.” (Isa 1:15 ESV) In commenting on this passage, Ron Allen and Gordon Borrer write,

It is possible to do all the right things but to do nothing right—if the heart is not right before the Lord. It is *holy* hands we raise to the Lord (1 Tim. 2:8) to bless His holy name and to implore His matchless grace. Bloody hands are pictures of soiled lives. Mistreatment of the poor, abuse of the unfortunate, debasing of the things of God, even bloodshed—such are the marks God sees on hands that are raised to Him when those hands are not holy.²

Even the simple act of standing can be offensive to God if unaccompanied by heart devotion. In Matthew 6, Jesus rebukes the hypocrites who “love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others.”

Our expressions of devotion on the outside must line up with attitudes of faith-filled devotion on the inside. Otherwise true worship is non-existent. No amount of bodily expressiveness can make up for a wayward, unrepentant heart. Jesus condemned such activity as vain worship in Mark 7:6: “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.’”

May our external actions always be indicative of passionate, truth-informed, ever growing love for our magnificent Savior.

Part 3

So far in this series, we’ve seen that Scripture supports a wide range of physical expressions in the worship of God, but that external responses in themselves are no guarantee true worship is taking place.

² Ron Allen and Gordon Borrer, *Worship: Rediscovering the Missing Jewel*, p 126

Still, many Christians struggle with freedom of expression. Certain actions in corporate worship can bring about feelings of discomfort or awkwardness. Christians who would enthusiastically jump to their feet after a touchdown or a brilliantly played violin concerto sometimes have difficulty displaying the same kind of emotion on a Sunday morning. Let's look at some reasons why that might be the case.

First, some Christians are simply unaware of what the Bible teaches about physical responses to God. They don't know that Scripture is filled with examples of exuberant, passionate worship (Ps 150; Neh 8:6; Rev 5:11–14). Perhaps they've grown up in a church environment that elevated certain types of expressions and ignored others. Often simply growing in an understanding of what the Bible says will bring about a greater freedom in corporate worship.

Other times, we restrict our responses to God because we're afraid of what others might think about us. We wonder if we'll tarnish our image as a "respectable" Christian. The Bible calls this the fear of man (Pr 29:25). In 2 Samuel 6, King David's wife, Michal, struggled with this sin as she watched her husband dance with all his might before the ark of the covenant. God responded to her concern for respectability by making her womb barren. Pastor Mark Buchanan comments,

God is not the safe-keeper of our reputations. God is not some priggish domestic deity, a heavenly Miss Manners intent on prescribing the etiquette that maintains polite society, aghast by any outburst of fervor. And our role on this Earth, be it prophet, king, priest, or homemaker, is not to keep ourselves from embarrassment. We must come before the King, dignified or undignified, robed or disrobed, in the presence of the elite or in the company of slave girls, and worship with all our might.³

Strong words, but worth heeding if we are more concerned about what people think than what God thinks.

Another reason our physical actions to God are tempered is theological presuppositions. I have good friends I respect deeply who love God passionately, know the Bible much better than I do, and are more reserved in their physical expressiveness. They believe our worship is to be characterized by an attitude of reverence and awe (Heb 12:28), soberness and solemnity. I agree with them that reverence and awe are essential to biblical worship, but would add those aren't always manifested in the same way. It's impossible to ignore the multitude of examples and commands in Scripture that emphasize celebration, passion, delight, and exuberance, all reflected through our bodies.

³ *Christianity Today*, Oct. 7, 2002, pp 53-54

Some maintain that worship is a matter of the heart, not the body. Actually, both are crucial. Romans 12:1 tells us that presenting our *bodies* to God as a living sacrifice is our spiritual worship. If I told my wife that I loved her in my heart, but never demonstrated it through physical actions, I doubt that she would believe me. We wouldn't have much of a marriage either.

No, expressiveness in worship is more than a cultural issue. Kneeling, lifting hands, shouting, dancing, standing, singing, bowing, and more are all appropriate ways to demonstrate our passion for God. But someone might ask how this gets worked out in a local church where people are at different places in their experience, maturity, and understanding.

Part 4

We've been examining the place and practice of bodily expression when we come together to worship God. The truth is that people in a congregation often view this issue in vastly different ways. Recently, I asked the Sovereign Grace Pastors' College students to discuss a biblical approach to bodily expression in the worship of God. One student, Mark Alderton, gave such an insightful answer that I asked his permission to use his response as an outline for this column.

How does a church leader wisely navigate the potentially stormy waters of physical expression in worship? Here are four guidelines.

1. Preach the magnificent attributes of God, centered on the gospel, to raise the affections of people for their God.

Any conversation about physical expressiveness in worship must begin with the glory of God himself. In much of our contemporary preaching and music we have barely scratched the surface of God's magnificence and splendor. Encouraging people to "sing like they mean it," or "jump higher for Jesus" draw attention to our actions rather than the greatness of the One we worship. We need fewer impassioned exhortations to expend more energy and many more theologically informed, compelling descriptions of God's nature, character and saving acts. We need more worship leaders who are able to passionately expound the glories of the gospel that reveals God's holiness, justice, love, mercy, and power.

2. Teach on the appropriateness of bodily expression in worship according to the exhortations and examples in Scripture.

As we've seen in this series, expressing our love for God through physical actions is natural, biblical, and commanded by God. Paul's appeal was that by the mercies of God, we present our "bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." While worship as a physical response extends beyond the corporate meeting, it's vital that we not neglect its importance DURING that time.

Our reasons for expressiveness must be derived from Scripture rather than our own personalities or preferences. Both extroverts and introverts, young and old, academics and athletes are called to worship God wholeheartedly in a way that expresses his worthiness and supreme value.

3. Teach also that true worship comes from a heart devoted to God and that bodily expressions without this may please others, but God is not deceived.

While emphasizing the importance of expression, we don't want to assume that specific physical responses are pleasing to God in and of themselves. Apart from a heart attitude that treasures God above all else, raised hands, dancing feet, or bowed knees can be a hindrance to true worship, and at worst, an offense to his glory.

4. Make allowances for the consciences of others in our expressions so as not to offend, yet continue to strive for worship that proceeds from "right thoughts in the head leading to right affections in the heart leading to right responses in the body." (John Piper)

In the end, our focus is not to be on ourselves or others, but God himself. Such a perspective adjusts both the worshiper who dances to the point of distracting others as well as the one who remains emotionless as those around him are undone by God's extravagant display of love through the cross.

Whatever our current level of expressiveness may be, my prayer is that others would be less taken by our physical displays and drawn more to worship the One who is worthy of our purest and highest affections.